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ABSTRACT

Discussions of audience, such as those by Russell Long, Carol Berkenkotter, David Park, Lisa Ede, and Andrea Lunsford, most often do not utilize the research by speech rhetoricians to whom the question of audience has always been central. Chaim Perelman's conception of the "universal audience" and traditional, speech-oriented rhetoric may enhance understanding of the writer-reader relationship. Classical rhetoricians think of audience as a group of listeners convened for a certain purpose, infused with certain expectations, and therefore vulnerable to skillful choices of persuasive means by rhetoricians; this view flourishes in speech communications departments. In contrast, writing theorists claim that though writers habitually form some controlling picture of their readers, few hold consistently to the same reader-image, at the same level of intensity, throughout the composing process. The reader as audience is partly fiction, a construct of the writer and the text. Similarly, the universal audience can be interpreted as every rational being; this audience can only exist as a conception of the writer. Perelman develops the concept of universal audience only into a philosophical formulation, but it could become a workable rhetorical tool. (SRT)

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Perelman's "Universal Audience" and Writing

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Perelman's "Universal Audience" and writing

In the last few years perhaps the most complex task in describing the writing process is the attempt to characterize the writer-reader relationship. Some very helpful probes into this question are available to us: articles by Russell Long, Carol Berkenkotter, David Park, and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford are perhaps the most familiar. what is striking about these essays is how little use they make of discussions of audience by speech rhetoricians, those purveyors of traditional rhetoric to whose discipline the question of audience has always been central. Ede herself, in her survey of literature on audience in the composing process, calls for more attention to traditional rhetorical ideas. Among those theorists she singles out as needing more attention is Chaim Perelman, whose work The New Rhetoric contains a concept he terms "universal audience," which Ede suggests might aid in understanding the process of written composition.

In this essay I'd like to hunt two kinds of game. I want to examine Perelman's concept of universal audience, adding to Ede's own useful discussion of it by examining its appropriateness and relevance to the composition discipline's ongoing debate about writer-reader relationships. At the same time, I want to keep my eyes open for another sort of game: namely, what there may be in traditional, speech-oriented rhetoric's picturing of the speaker-audience relationship that may enhance, or perhaps obfuscate, our definitions of the writer-reader relationship. I'm looking for Perelman's universal audience on this hunt, but I'm also going to keep my eyes on the far slopes in hopes of sighting something that could help us

understand why the work of our brethen in speech and rhetoric departments is not as prominent as one would expect in discussions of audience in the writing process.

I'm going to assume as self-evident the fact that, though the differential may be shrinking, in academia today there are still more courses with the word "rhetoric" in them, and more research into "rhetoric," in speech communication departments than in English departments, where writing is taught. Yet despite the preponderance of attention to all aspects of rhetoric in the discipline that now habitually claims that field, there is relatively little cross-fertilization between rhetoricians of speech and writing. This is particularly so, I find, with regard to the question of audience. Is there any prospect that our historically estranged disciplines can move toward some common ground with respect to understanding audience? Can Perelman's concept of universal audience be of use in any such rapprochement?

Let's first briefly consider the way audience is treated in traditional rhetoric; we can probably agree rather quickly on its general outlines. The question of audience enters Aristotle's discussions, for example, in two ways. He categorizes the methods available to the speaker in terms of the logical, emotional, and personal appeals by which audiences may be moved; and he categorizes discourse in terms of whether listeners are judges(in which case discourse is judicial or deliberative) or spectators(in which case discourse is epideictic). Cicero's <u>De Inventione</u>, a primary source of technical rhetoric well into the Renaissance, codifies discourse into parts, each of which has a certain role to play with respect to the

audience: the first part, the exordium, in George Kennedy's words "prepares the audience to receive the speech and should make each listener benevolus, attentus, docilis, that is, well-disposed to the speaker, attentive, and receptive"(92-3). On the whole, in other words, classical rhetoricians think of "audience" as a group of listeners convened for a certain purpose, infused with certain expectations, and therefore vulnerable to skillful choices of persuasive means by rhetors. Conceiving thus of audience as a collective being with identifiable vulnerabilities and the volition to respond, the classical writers treat the rhetor-audience relationship as an agonistic, exploitative interaction between two ontologically distinct entities.

This conception of audience remains part of the rhetorical tradition as it flourishes in speech communication departments today, even as rhetoricians struggle with the persistent difficulties in distinguishing the characteristics of oral rhetoric from the rhetoric of written texts. In a 1925 essay much cited by speech rhetoricians, Herbert Wichelns argues that rhetorical criticism should learn from literary criticism to go beyond mere "effect" to broader considerations of "permanent value"(34). But here is how Wichelns defines the ideal rhetorical critic's handling of audience: good criticism "requires a description of the speaker's audience . . . . [in order to show the speaker's] judgment of human nature in his audiences"(38). Moreover, concludes Wichelns, "the effect of the discourse on its immediate hearers is not to be ignored"(39). For Wichelns, whether it consists of listeners to an oral discourse or readers of a printed speech, audience is a describable, locatable

entity.

More recent discussions of speaker-audience relationships maintain the same stance. Consider, for example, the assumptions about audience contained in "The Rhetorical Situation" by Lloyd Bitzer. This well-known essay argues that all rhetorical activity begins with a "situation" consisting of an "exigence" or stimulus, the "audience," and "constraints" which affect rhetor and audience. Distinguishing "a body of mere hearers or readers" from a rhetorical audience, he defines the latter as "those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse"(8). For Bitzer, an audience is sentient, existent, possessed of free will, and capable of responding to discourse by modifying behavior or attitudes. In an essay responding to Bitzer's argument, Scott Consigny argues that Bitzer's emphasis on the determinative power of the rhetorical situation ignores both the rhetor's freedom to shape discourse and "particularities of persons, actions and agencies in a certain place and time"(178). The listening audience is a group of "particularities" located in space and time: "A rhetor speaking in Milwaukee in 1968 to the DAR faces a different task than the rhetor who finds himself in St. Petersburg in 1919 addressing young Bolsheviks"(178). Nor is the rhetorical transaction complete, says Consigny, until "the audience reaches a decision or judgment" resolving the conflict that generated the rhetorical situation(179). This sense that rhetorical criticism is not complete until it specifies and localizes a discourse's audience--which is self-actualized and independent of the rhetor--may be found again in a more recent rejoinder to the debate over the rhetorical situation.

Identifying the audience's role in establishing constraints in a rhetorical situation, John Patton speaks of "constraints used by audiences in defining the nature of rhetorical situations," the identifying of which can help rhetorical critics "describe the deliberations and choices made by audiences . . . in generating actions"(45-6). Again, audience is conceived as a self-actualizing body whose response to the rhetorical situation helps determine both the speaker's choices and the outcome of the discourse.

Note, in contrast, what recent writing theorists have said about "readers" in the composing process. (footnote: Let me put quote marks around this word the first time I use it, to show that the term may include either actual readers or projections of the writer's imagination or both; I'M going to let theorists I cite speak for themselves as to their own distinctions.) Recent discussions by those theorists mentioned in the first paragraph have at once clarified and made more complex our understanding of the writer-reader relationship. Just as we now accept that experienced writers habitually form some controlling picture of their readers, so paradoxically we also understand that few writers hold consistently to the same reader-image, at the same level of intensity, throughout the composing process. Park has argued persuasively that teaching inexperienced writers to think of readers as a "single, locatable something" forces them to constrain a reader-imaging process which actually "involves many different contexts dispersed through a text"(252). Categories that help us distinguish among these "different contexts" are provided by Ede and Lunsford's discussion of audiences that writers "address"(and which possess some "concrete reality") and those that

writers "invoke"(i.e. invent as roles to be adopted by readers).

Perhaps most significantly, as Park and Ede point out, Ong's earlier, seminal article has influenced recent theorizing to such an extent that the term "reader" for us now inevitably contains some notional, projective dimension; we cannot help but think of the reader as some part fiction, a construct of the writer and her text. Knoblauch and Brannnon make this point cogently:

> "'the reader' as a constraint on discourse," they suggest, "does not mean any one individual who actually reads a text. A writer's intended reader is always imaginary. This fact remains true at either extreme of the composing situation: when a writer knows an actual reader for whom the text is intended, the conception of that reader is no less a fiction; and, when a writer is composing highly personal discourse . . . the conception of an intended reader is nonetheless actively present(67).

For those of us interested primarily in the writing process, the term "reader" must be construed both empirically and notionally. Attempts by writers during composing to recreate the values and expectations of actual readers blend inextricably with their efforts to construct imaginatively a persona of the reader appropriate to their intentions. Rather than speaking of empirically locatable beings actively shaping, or being shaped by, writers' choices, we talk of entities who exist as projected images of writers' imaginations, having life as a composite of textual cues. Or we speak of actual readers who must "become", or join identities with, projected readers, in order to share in the writer-reader transaction. Such ambivalence

about the ontological status of readers is not found in audience-discussions by speech rhetoricians. Their concern is not with the what and why of audiences, but with the how: how they affect the rhetor's choices, how these choices move them, and how the rhetorical situation is to be assessed in terms of their dynamic role in it.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca formulate their concept of "universal audience" squarely within the tradition of speech rhetoric. The best evidence for this lies in the frequency with which they contradict their own assertion early in The New Rhetoric that "we cannot be limited to the examination of spoken discourse . . . . our analyses will primarily be concerned with printed texts"(6). No sooner do they make this claim than they demonstrate their obedience to speech-rhetoric's traditional definition of audience as a group of actual listeners assembled before a speaker and subject to empirical description: "audience," they posit, is "the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation"(19). And though they add that audience is "visualized by one undertaking to argue" as "a more or less systematized construction," this construction is not projection of the speaker's intention having life in and through discourse, but a model made as exactly as possible to the dimensions of the actual hearers: "in real argumentation, care must be taken to form a concept of the anticipated audience as close as possible to reality"(19-20). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca continue by reciting some of classical rhetoric's most persistent conventions about audience:

1. The audience constrains the

speaker's purposes to the point that oratory may be classified "on the basis of the role performed by the audience addressed"(21).

2. Knowledge of the actual audience "is knowledge of how to bring about its conditioning"(23).

3. Speakers must understand that "in argumentation, the important thing is not knowing what the speaker regards as true and important, but knowing the views of those he is addressing"(24).

The empirical, volitional assumptions visible in this discussion of speaker-audience relations would seem to allow it little relevance to the writer-reader understandings outlined earlier. However, when Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca begin to articulate their definition of the "universal audience," they begin to shift their ground. A universal audience consists of "all normal, adult persons. . . transcending all [other audiences]"(30). In his shorter work The Realm of Rhetoric Perelman characterizes this audience as "those disposed to hear [the speaker] and are capable of following his argumentation . . . every sufficiently enlightened human being"(16). Perelman's urgent desire to articulate a rationalist rhetoric is nowhere more evident than in his assertion that only discourse directed to the universal audience can claim to be "convincing" rather than merely "persuasive." To convince the universal audience, the rhetor must "convince the reader[sic] that the reasons adduced are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity"(The New Rhetoric 32).(footnote: the use of "reader" may be a vagary of the authors or a translator's accident; it is not repeated and seems to have no significance for the authors). Such a definition opens itself

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to a notional interpretation: the universal audience, every rational human being, can surely only exist as a conception of the rhetor. when Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca continue by saying that "each speaker" is characterized "by the image he himself holds of the universal audience," and that "everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men"(33), we are reminded of Ede and Lunsford's "audience invoked," that version of reader which is a "construction of the writer."

Apparently the universal audience is not to be identified with any of the following:

1. A group of listeners assembled for a particular speech.

2. A specific political, social, or cultural constituency.

3. Any individual or group conceived as ontologically distinct the rhetor's "image" of that audience.

It appears that in describing the universal audience, the authors have developed a genuinely notional definition of audience: the universal audience exists as an embodiment of the rhetor's reason, as it attempts to develop arguments having "absolute and timeless validity" and, at the same time, project an audience responsive only to such arguments.

Some critics(see especially Ray) have contended that the authors contradict the categorical validity of the universal audience by asserting that "each individual, each culture, has . . . its own conception of the universal audience," but Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca appear to account for any localizing of the universal

audience by saying that "the undefined universal audience . . . pass[es] judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to such a concrete audience"(35). This appears to mean that any cultural or social specification of audience, and the particular values associated with it, are subject to the judgment of the larger universal audience, i.e. to the standards of "absolute and timeless validity" of a truly "universal" audience, as it must finally live in the reason of the rhetor--and thus in all human nature, as the authors maintain.

Such a profoundly rationalist audience-construct clearly discounts non-rational elements of human nature, and thus opens itself to criticisms of being rigidly idealist and quite untenable in terms of contemporary understandings of the human psyche. It serenely ignores the emotional and intuitive elements of discourse that Plato and Aristotle themselves felt obliged to account for. Yet be that as it may, the insistence that a certain "audience" is coterminous with the rhetor's most general, reasoned judgments, and that such an "audience" may claim its being only as an articulated set of such judgments made by the rhetor, goes much beyond speech rhetoric's traditional understanding of audience as outlined earlier. Indeed, it converges rather strikingly with the notional audience-definitions of recent composition researchers, suggesting a useful way to articulate the major role played by the speaker/writer in inventing and projecting audience.

what is needed for those of us interested in composing for writers is some consideration of ways in which the "universal audience" may be developed to help in understanding the complexity of the writing process. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not develop the concept into a workable rhetorical tool; they are content to leave it a philosophical formulation. But consider what we do not know about the composing process: when writers compose for readers they know personally, in what fashion do they hold their expectations of such audiences? When they compose for readers they do not know personally but whose expectations and values they grasp, in what ways do they form those readers? And when they compose for a general readership whose judgments and values they do not have specific knowledge of, out of what assumptions and understandings do they shape or "invoke" such readers? That they do so we feel certain. But upon what basis do they limn such fictions? To what extent, we might ask, do writers compose "invoked" readers out of rational judgments which might lay claim to universal understanding? For that matter, to what extent do those composing discourse for general, unknown audiences bring intuitions and emotions into play which themselves could claim universality? Such questions as these seem most appropriate to the provocations offered us by the "universal audience."

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